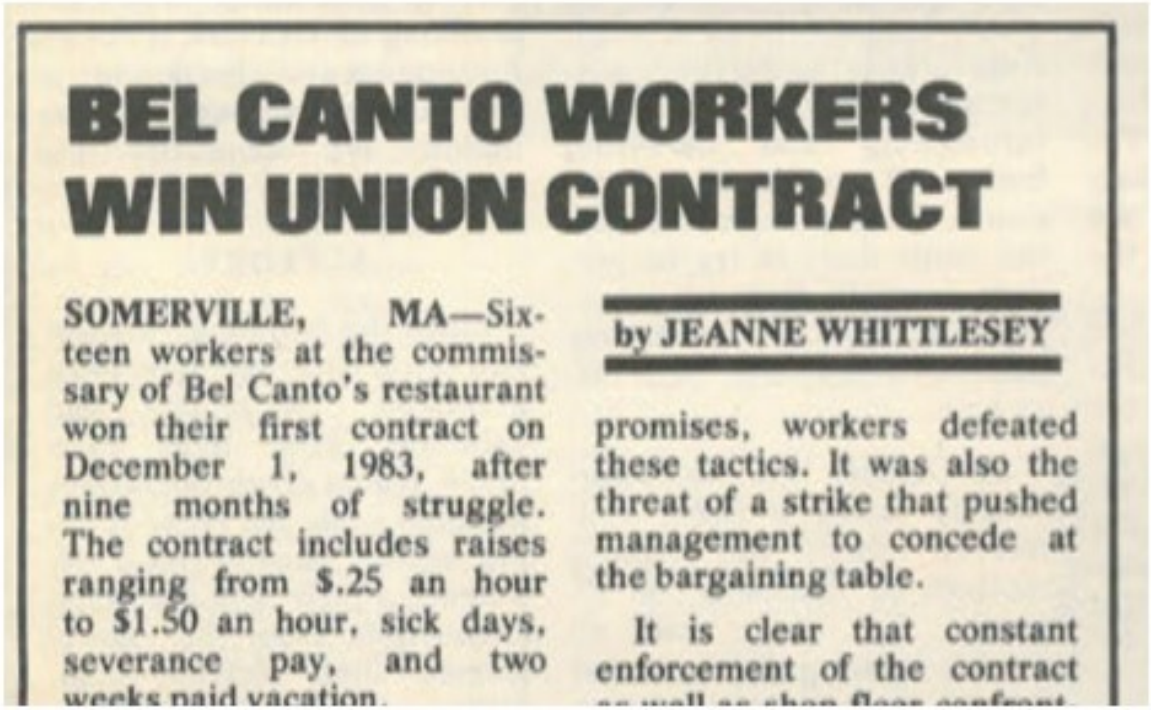

BEL CANTO WORKERS WIN UNION CONTRACT

SOMERVILLE, MA—Sixteen workers at the commissary of Bel Canto's restaurant won their first contract on December 1, 1983, after nine months of struggle. The contract includes raises ranging from $.25 an hour to $1.50 an hour, sick days, severance pay, and two weeks paid vacation.

by JEANNE WHITTLESEY

promises, workers defeated these tactics. It was also the threat of a strike that pushed management to concede at the bargaining table.

It is clear that constant enforcement of the contract

Article from Socialist Worker newspaper (U.S.)

Small Opportunities Should Not Be Ignored: My First Workplace Organizing Experience

by Joe Allen

August 7, 2019

The DSA convention earlier this month kicked off some of the most important discussion about socialists and workplace organizing in a generation. I want to recount an experience from my own political life, similar to situations that I think many comrades find themselves in these days, and note how important it can be to take advantage of even small opportunities.

Shortly after leaving UMass-Boston in 1983 myself and several of my friends from school including Paul D., Olga S., and the late Bill S. started working in the central kitchen of a small restaurant chain called Bel Canto in Somerville, Massachusetts. My buddy Don J. worked there and hired us. Bel Canto specialized in faux Italian food that was incredibly doughy and fatty.

We made most of this crap, including the calzones, in the central kitchen or commissary that were then shipped out to the various Bel Canto locations in Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston, where they were then cooked and served. About twenty of us worked there, mostly on the day shift. There was a small night shift. Bel Canto had a hip image and was quite popular for a time.

All of us in the commissary were incredibly underpaid with no benefits to speak of. We weren't given a meal allowance of any kind, even though we made food all day long. We surreptitiously acquired calzones for lunch and other food items from the store room that we brought home to supplement our meager wages. But we also had fun at work and many of us socialized, especially on Fridays after work, when we would go out for margaritas at a local bar.

Henry Patterson, the owner of Bel Canto, styled himself a new type of businessman—something of a left-liberal with a personal touch. He donated to all the right causes and used all the right buzzwords and phrases that were popular with middle class liberals. Bill S., whose father was a Boston Police detective, and who always picked up on cultural trends much quicker than me, dubbed Patterson a member of the "Hip-geoisie."

Having so many radicals in one place brought up the discussion of forming a union early on. The union movement at the time was literally collapsing around us. We were talking about forming a union soon after Reagan's destruction of PATCO. Hats off to us, I say. The kids had some moxie! Forming a union was made more practical because Local 26 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union was in the midst of change.

Domenic Bozzoto, a former bartender, was HERE's new leader in Boston and he struck a definite reform pose and was quite popular for a while. He made some important changes to the old mobbed up and racist local union, including hiring a few radicals for the staff. Bozzoto was also a very good public speaker. Danny Clifford, who was sympathetic to the militant tendency in the UK, was the Local 26 treasurer. Together they took on some of biggest employers, including Harvard.

We decided after several meetings that we could only organize the central kitchen at the time. Some of us met with a Local 26 organizer, and then went to the NLRB to get the paperwork to file a petition for union representation. Being the clever bastards that we were, we waited until Henry went on vacation before we filed the petition and that gave us another week to organize. We were giddy with excitement and waited for the world to come crashing down upon Henry's return.

The Monday morning following Henry's return the atmosphere was tense at work—there had clearly been weekend meetings to deal with our union petition. During our first morning break we all sat out in the nearby playground like we always did when Henry came out to talk to us. He tried his best with the worn-out clichés of "my door is always open," "unions are a third party," etc… But, as we had all agreed at our last meeting we told him, "you can only meet with our elected representatives and union organizer to negotiate a contract." We then got up and went back to work. He was stunned and sat in the playground alone.

Henry was no slouch, though. He could talk liberal and hire the best union-busting law firm in Boston. His lawyers went after our petition right away. The NLRB proved to be pretty useless. Henry's lawyers succeeded in removing four of us from the future bargaining unit after some silly testimony from one his managers that they were "supervisors," even though none of them were aware that they were! Careful note taking by Jean W.—on what jobs people had and what they actually did every day—saved us and kept most of us in the bargaining unit. The NLRB ordered an election.

Henry didn't give up and even seemed further enraged by the NLRB decision. He brought in a new kitchen manager from one of the restaurants who tried to intimidate us. Every time she tried to corner and berate someone, we would gather in a crowd and yell back at her. I recall she stormed out after one of these crowd scenes yelling, "This isn't normal!"

The next battle was over who could vote in the election—the so-called "excelsior list." Henry brought in some very poor Vietnamese refugees to work in the kitchen hoping to stuff the voting list, I guess, with no votes. I also guess he thought these guys would hate all of the radicals in the kitchen. This backfired on Henry. Because most of the Vietnamese workers spoke and read almost no English, they could not read the safety warnings around the kitchen.

I remember one guy slipped and fell ten feet or more off the walk-in freezer. The rotating cutters and mixers throughout the kitchen had no warnings or instructions in Vietnamese. We were the ones, not management, that who tried to keep these guys safe. In the end the NLRB ruled that they could vote in the election and many drifted away from working at Bel Canto.

We won the union election and prepared for negotiations. We had rank and filers on the negotiating committee with Danny Clifford as lead negotiator. Of course, Patterson's lawyers tried to stall, so we decided to make a big move on him and took the campaign out of the restaurants, leafletting all the customers at peak business hours. Patterson was clearly worried about this

tarnishing his liberal image and signed a deal with us including big pay raises and severance pay.

Our small victory, however, came to an end a few months later when Henry's business consultants realized that he could do without a central kitchen and have the work done in the non-union restaurants or by contractors. We took our severance pay and went on to other jobs. Henry Patterson stayed in the restaurant business. One thing I'll say to Bel Canto workers now is that there is no better substitute for workplace justice and respect than being in a union.

I learned many things from the Bel Canto organizing campaign that have stayed with me to this day:

1.) Workers organize themselves and then choose a union that is the most helpful to the organizing drive.

2.) The NLRB sucks.

3.) Taking action is always the best option to force the boss' hand.

4.) The boss also learns from an organizing drive and can exploit your weaknesses.

The Bel Canto campaign was a very small campaign long ago but demonstrated for me that small opportunities should not be ignored and can have a life-long impact on those involved in them.